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Peter Dekker

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Peter Dekker was an elementary teacher of the old order: discipline. Everything he did reflected discipline. Life for Mr. Dekker began each day at 5:00 A.M. with a three-mile run down the railroad track that stretched through the Minnesota prairie village of Prinsburg. While the rest of the burg's 450 residents slept, Mr. Dekker ran for refreshment, he said: "To breathe in the morning." After the run he did his twenty push-ups, thirty sit-ups, daily devotions, and he was "refreshed" enough to face us eighth graders who peered at him through sleepy eyes from behind our wooden and metal grill-work desks—desks which he insisted be lined up within an eighth of an inch of his discipline in order for us to do "productive work."

Throughout my nine months in grade eight, Mr. Dekker began every day the same way. He stepped light-footed from behind his big oak desk with a Bible in the fingers of his left hand, and nothing in the fingers of the right. Those right-hand fingers, big knuckled with hairy interludes linking the digits together, twitched. The fingers were eager. They wanted to pull us into our work even before the 8:30 bell gave Mr. Dekker the authority to do that.

"Rrrrrinng," said the bell, but the knuckles called us to order. "Bbbbbottt," they said if everyone, including Hubert Wieberdink, Wesley Nieuwberta, and Randy Taatjes were seated and attentive. Then the knuckles cracked against Mr. Dekker's desk top. But if Hubert had not finished punching Randy, or if Wesley had not returned Erna's shoe, then the knuckles spoke their other language. "Kkkkrockk," they said as they and their hairy connectors danced on the student's skull.

Either way Mr. Dekker had our attention, and the new day officially started. Bible reading was first. He opened the wrinkled, black covers of his King James version to our morning "passage." It seemed to make no difference what it was: a narrative from Genesis, a poem from Psalms, or a parable from Luke. The man knew what the piece was about, and he believed what he knew. His conviction was the authority that held us in our places and led us through the passage.

Then we prayed, and after we prayed, Mr. Dekker recited his poem. It was always the same poem. I don't recall his ever mentioning the title or the author, and I don't remember ever seeing the piece in print; but I liked the poem then, and I like it now. The poem started with Mr. Dekker's nimble frame standing very erect in his black, spit-polished shoes. Then the heavy brows stood up over the top of the wire-rimmed spectacles. The gray-blue eyes looked over our heads, through the cinder-block wall in the back of the classroom, past

the railroad tracks and the grain elevator, and out to somewhere beyond where the eyes saw what the poem was about. Then the clear tenor voice began:

Here hath been dawning another bleeuue day.
Think! Wilt thou let it slip useless away?
Out of eternity each new day is born;
Into eternity at night shall return.
Behold it aforetime no eye ever did—
So soon it forever from all eyes is hid.
Here hath been dawning another bleeuue day . . .

Then the eyes pulled back into our world to fix on Wesley whose fingers were lightly exploring the new, tender spot on the top of his skull. Their eyes connected, Wesley's fingers froze, and the poem concluded:

Think, wilt thou let it slip useless away?

Mr. Dekker feared letting any of it slip useless away. After the poem he force-fed us geography by making us memorize Brazil's annual rainfall, France's population, and China's three main exports. He taught us English by giving us endless spelling lists to memorize and books of sentences to diagram. He taught reading by giving us phonics worksheets which we all completed whether we needed them or not; and by giving us a tattered literature text from which we all read aloud whether we could pronounce the words or not.

Mr. Dekker knew that his lessons were tough, but he believed we could learn them if we understood the value of life and if we had the necessary determination to live it. He tried to teach us about determination through his stories—like the one about the snowstorm or the one about the pony. One winter night, he said, he was working late in a one-room schoolhouse, and a snowstorm swept over the prairie. But he had to get home to his wife and children. He told us how he clung to barbed wire fences and crawled through the snow along ditches so he wouldn't get lost in the storm. At 2:00 A.M., he said, he finished the three-mile trek, took a hot bath, rubbed himself down with a stiff towel, slept for two hours, and returned to school. "Notice my grim determination!" he told the class in general and Randy in particular.

Another time he taught the same lesson with a different story. "I bought a pony," said Mr. Dekker. "But the pony was wild. So I tied a rope around his neck. Then I jumped on. But the pony bucked me off. So I jumped on again. But the pony bucked me off again. So I jumped on again! Then I rode him around the farm." He paused momentarily. His gray eyes grabbed hold of Hubert's attention, and Mr. Dekker reviewed his theme: "Notice my grim determination!"

Mr. Dekker lived in a rhythm of urgency which taught us that life was made up of minutes, and minutes mattered. Every day we wolfed our bag lunches as quickly as his discipline allowed, and then we dashed out on the playground for a half hour of fun. If the game was baseball or basketball, the boys and girls played separately. But sometimes, as a whole class, we played "I Send,"

a game in which two "captains" choose up sides; the sides line up facing each other from opposite ends of the playground; and a captain "sends" a person in his line to catch and tag a person in the opposite line. The side with the best runner always won, and Dalen and Alan were the best runners . . . unless Mr. Dekker came out to play. Then his white shirt, shiny shoes, and gray hair flashed across the playground so fast that Dalen and Alan moved like turtles. The man even played urgently.

After lunch we plunked down in our straight rows, sweaty, tired—but awake because it was story time. Mr. Dekker pulled out books which he used more as props with which to tell the stories than as scripts from which to read the stories; as the years had passed he must have memorized them in the telling. We loved that time of day when the hairy fingers opened those action-packed story books so wide that our whole class could step in to meet his characters—characters who lived in places so different from our Minnesota prairie during times so different from our own. Life was short in Mr. Dekker's books, and his characters knew that.

As I sift through the details of what I remember about the rest of my life in grade eight, I know that Mr. Dekker was not my best teacher. Much of what he taught, and the way he taught it, did not make good use of our time. I think I knew that even then. In fact, this was probably the fact which I fought to deny that Wednesday morning after the school board meeting. That morning Mr. Dekker entered the room on time, as usual, in his freshly-ironed suit, starched white shirt, and shiny, black shoes. The clothes were right, but the frame was not; and the slumped-shouldered frame spoke long before the voice. His clear tenor cracked as he announced that the school board had fired him. He said they decided that at sixty-something he was too old to teach eighth graders about their world: his lesson plans were obsolete, and his methods were out of date.

I sat there in my straight row that morning and ached for a man I had come to love. He loved me, and he loved teaching—I knew that. Even though it wasn't time yet for noon recess and the stories which followed, I missed them already because I knew that our class had fewer minutes during which we could look where he looked and see what he saw.

After Mr. Dekker left town, I had other, younger teachers who taught with modern lesson plans and disciplined with up-to-date methods. While some were good, and most could talk about current events, few were as relevant as Mr. Dekker. Only a few could see through Scripture passages to recognize a new dawn for what it was and what it could mean for a classroom of eighth graders. Fewer had the discipline "to breathe in every morning." And only one or two had the wisdom to perceive that a poem like Mr. Dekker's might be precisely the short-cut necessary for eighth

graders who needed to breathe in the morning, but lacked the discipline to do so on an early morning run.

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Ceramic Work - Porcelain and Stoneware by Jacob Van Wyk

The ceramic work pictured here is wheel-thrown porcelain and stoneware fired to cone 10 or a temp. of 2450° fahrenheit. The surface glaze is actually molten glass and the color is attributed to metallic oxides and opacifiers suspended in a feldsparithic glaze. Color and chemical composition of the clay itself contributes to the final color and luster of the piece. They were fired in a reduced or *oxygen starved* atmosphere of a gas kiln which is presently being refitted for firing on Dordt's campus. Reducing the kiln at critical stages in the firing process causes chemical changes in the metallic oxides of the clay and glaze, producing a rich variety of color and surface luster.

One may not exclude a technical reference in a discussion of the process of making ceramic work, but control of process remains subject to artistic decision-making. I prefer to establish a dialog with the clay as the form is developing, looking for subtle relationships in texture, shape, and balance. As I discover relationships that work, it's important to know when to stop and let the piece avail itself as finished work that projects a confident presence approaching my goal of uncommon beauty in ceramic form. I've experienced the excitement and joy of being part of this process and of extending God's truth in visual form. I trust the viewer will share in the celebration of the form itself and in beauty that is not secondary to utilitarian function.